

**TCCVS
LEGISLATIVE UPDATE
84TH LEGISLATIVE SESSION
AUGUST 11, 2015**

HEALTH WORKGROUP

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need a standard, local point of access to local or statewide mental health resources.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Examine the role of the network of Veteran County Service Officers throughout the state and consider ways to expand and enhance its capabilities to serve Veterans in areas beyond claims representation and counseling.
- Promote the continued integration and enhancement of existing infrastructure for the delivery of Veterans' services and programs, specifically mental health resources.
- Invest state resources towards the delivery of resources or services to Veterans and their families to strengthen existing networks and infrastructure before consideration is given to investment of new delivery methods.

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- H.B. 906, by Paddie, adds spouses of retired Veterans who served at least 20 years on active duty to the list of individuals eligible to serve as Veterans county service officers, which will permit counties to better serve their Veterans by enabling them to find and retain qualified Veterans county service officers
- H.B. 19, by S. King, codifies the collaboration between the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) to train peers who connect Veterans and their families to resources. H.B. 19 directs DSHS and TVC to:
 - Coordinate to administer a mental health intervention program for Veterans; and
 - Include in the existing mental health program an initiative to encourage local communities to conduct cross-sector collaboration to coordinate local resources.
- S.B. 1304 by Sen. Menendez, adds a women's Veteran initiative to the requirements for the DSHS mental health intervention program for Veterans.
- S.B. 1305 by Sen. Menéndez adds a rural Veteran's initiative to the requirements for the DSHS mental health intervention program for Veterans.
- H.B. 3404, by Rep. Thompson, directs HHSC to conduct a study to assess the benefits of providing integrated care to Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and to involve family members in the treatments. HHSC may coordinate with a university with expertise in behavioral health or post-traumatic stress disorder. A report describing the results is required December 1, 2016.
- S.B. 55, by Sen. Nelson, requires HHSC to establish a grant program to support community mental health programs providing services and treatment to Veterans and their families. Rider 68 of the 2016-2017 General Appropriations Act appropriated \$10 million in general revenue to HHSC in each fiscal year of the biennium to implement S.B. 55.

- House Bill 1762, by Rep. Otto, codifies the current efforts of the Texas Health Care Strike Force Team within TVC and create a permanent health care advocacy program for Veterans. In partnership with the VA, the health care advocacy program will strategically place liaisons in VA medical facilities throughout the state and work directly with VA staff to resolve access issues involving health care related services such as Doctors' appointments, health care related testing and/or lab testing, pharmacy assistance, and attaining outside referrals for health related issues.
- House Bill 3404, by Rep. S. Thompson, was signed by the governor and directs the Health and Human Services Commission to conduct a study on the benefits of providing integrated care to Veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The study would evaluate the benefits of using a standardized comprehensive trauma and PTSD assessment to identify and target evidence-based treatment services to provide integrated care for Veterans diagnosed with PTSD. It also would evaluate benefits of involving family members in the treatment of a Veteran diagnosed with PTSD.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans in crisis need to be identified through effective suicide prevention/crisis awareness measures prior to the escalation of crisis.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Acknowledge that vibrant programs that promote peer-to-peer interactions are important suicide prevention tactics.
- Promote training for suicide intervention for those working day-to-day with Veterans and their family members.
- Recognize that those who work day-to-day with Veterans also need training to understand their community's mental health care system and how to access military-informed providers as well as partners such as the Military Veteran Peer Network volunteers and coordinators.

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- H.B. 19, by S. King, codifies the collaboration between the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) and the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) to train peers who connect Veterans and their families to resources. H.B. 19 directs DSHS and TVC to:
 - Coordinate to administer a mental health intervention program for Veterans; and
 - Include in the existing mental health program an initiative to encourage local communities to conduct cross-sector collaboration to coordinate local resources.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need communities in which they live in to provide and promote opportunities for Veterans to gather with peers.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Create a Veteran engagement primer that could be disseminated to communities seeking to establish Veteran engagement strategies.
- Develop community buy-in to utilize or develop local, county, or state property, Veteran Service Organization (VSO) facilities, National Guard Armories, churches, etc. to develop spaces for Veterans to meet with peers and service delivery outlets.
- Commit to the creation of more Veteran Peer Network Centers. This commitment should include funding to document and report results from the operations and to build tools to empower the volunteers that assist Veterans and their families

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- HHSC is coordinating with the Texas Veterans Commission's new Faith and Community-based Liaison, Craig Combs, a retired National Guard Chaplain, to enhance Veteran and family member support throughout Texas.

EMPLOYMENT WORKGROUP

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need enhanced opportunities to pursue careers within Texas state government.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Veteran's employment preference statute should be reformed to allow state agencies to post positions to be filled by Veterans only and give state agencies the authority to make direct hires of highly qualified individuals qualifying for Veterans employment preference without announcing or advertising the position.
- The Veteran Employment Liaison effort at the Texas Veterans Commission should be expanded in order to increase the capacity of the program to serve all agencies of state government.
- All state agencies should be encouraged to work with the Texas Veterans Commission's Veteran Employment Liaison to receive specific assistance in increasing the employment rate of Veterans within their agency.

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- S.B. 805, by Sen. Campbell was signed by the governor and allows direct hiring of Veterans by agencies through the Texas Workforce Commission's automated job matching system, requires agencies to interview Veterans, and ensures agencies with more than 500 FTEs (full-time equivalents) designate a Veteran's liaison.
- TVC primer events for state agencies
- TVC Veterans' Employment Liaison

Veteran Need #2

Veterans and state regulatory/certifying agencies who issue occupational licenses should be aware of how to successfully implement measures to evaluate military experience.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Other regulatory agencies should use TDLR's primer for developing service credit for occupational licensing to act as a guide for accurately evaluating military service credit.
- Regulatory agencies should establish a process for a military service member or Veteran to submit an application for a license or apprenticeship and to obtain credit for verified military experience, service, training or education.
- Regulatory agencies should update the procedures for military spouses to obtain a Texas License, while recognizing the differences in scope and applicability of the existing and new statutory provisions related to military spouses.

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- S.B. 389, by Sen. Rodriguez, was signed by the governor and requires job information forms to include a space for state agencies to include the related military occupation specialty code, if applicable, on all forms and notices relating to state agency employment openings. Military occupational specialty codes are nine-character codes utilized by the United States military to identify a specific job.
- Senate Bill 1307 by Sen. Menendez, ensures that every military spouse, Veteran, and servicemember gets credit for their skills and have their occupational licenses expedited.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans with occupational certifications need help starting their own businesses or utilizing their licenses to become employed.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Formalize an interagency referral system between regulatory and certifying agencies issuing professional and occupational licenses and certifications to Veterans with the Texas Veterans Commission's Veteran Entrepreneur Program, Veteran Employment Services program, and other state agencies in order to assist Veterans gain the knowledge and skills necessary to start their own businesses or to gain meaningful employment as a result of their newly obtained licenses and certifications.

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- S.B. 807, by Sen. Campbell, was signed by the governor and expedites the employment of skilled Veterans by waiving examination and fee requirements for occupational licenses issued by state agencies.
- S.B. 660, by Rodriguez, was signed by the governor and will establish regional program coordinators within TVC's Veteran Entrepreneur Program in major centers of economic growth across the state. These coordinators will provide comprehensive training to prospective Veteran entrepreneurs, then transition the participants to actual Veteran business owners.
- House Bill 2014, by Rep. Kenneth Sheets, allows for experience obtained through military service to obtain a certification to teach career and technology education classes in public schools

HIGHER EDUCATION WORKGROUP

Veteran Need #1

The state needs more statistical data to evaluate academic outcomes for Veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Veterans and their dependents should be included in the CBM system of reports provided to the state by public, private nonprofit, private for profit, community, technical and state colleges in order to better analyze the academic outcomes for Veterans and dependents enrolled in institutions of higher education.

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- H.B. 1160, by Rep Farias would have included Veterans and their dependents in the CBM system of reports provided to the state by public, private nonprofit, private for profit, community, technical and state colleges.
- H.B. 1160 was filed on February 5, 2015 and referred to the House Committee on Higher Education on March 3, 2015. The bill did not receive a hearing date and died in committee.

Veteran Need #2

Veterans need continued support for the Hazlewood program.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workgroup reviewed the language of Senate Bill 1158 (83rd Session, 2013) and applauded the Texas Veterans Commission for initiating the programs by reprogramming internal funds. The Hazlewood program requires funding to execute and sustain the mandate of Senate Bill 1158.

- The Texas Legislature should fund Senate Bill 1158 appropriately to administer all components of the mandate.
- The Texas Legislature should consider increasing the permanent trust to enhance the sustainability of the Hazlewood program.

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The 84th Legislature appropriated \$390,000 per year to TVC to fund the administration of the Hazlewood program and authorized 7 FTEs.

Veteran Need #3

Veterans need the experience and skills gained as a result of their military service applied to certifications, licenses, and academic degrees in order to facilitate and expedite their integration into the civilian workforce.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The workgroup reviewed the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) report to the 83rd Legislature regarding College Credit for Heroes (CC4H) program as well as hearing updates from the TWC on the program's current status. The workgroup concluded that the CC4H program presents excellent educational opportunities for Texas Veterans and recommends the following to strengthen the program:

- Expand TWC's CC4H program in community college and Texas State Technical College campuses throughout the state and expand the number/type of professions in the program.
- Encourage collaboration between CC4H and Texas Department of Licensing and Regulation to expedite the licensing process through award of appropriate credit for military training and experience.
- Encourage partnerships between industry and community colleges to accelerate training for Veterans in high demand career fields.
- Encourage Texas colleges and universities to provide individualized counseling to Veterans in order to optimize the acceptance of prior military training and experience when developing degree plans for Veterans.
- Encourage Texas colleges and universities to develop articulation agreements and memoranda of understanding with Central Texas College to accept credit evaluated or awarded for military training and/or experience.

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- S.B. 806, by Sen. Campbell, was signed by the governor and amends the Labor Code to require the Texas Workforce Commission, not later than November 1 of each year and after consultation with the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, to report to the legislature and the governor on the results of any grants awarded under the College Credit for Heroes program on the best practices for Veterans and military servicemembers to achieve maximum academic or workforce education credit at institutions of higher education for military experience, education, and training obtained during military service

CRIMINAL JUSTICE WORKGROUP

Veteran Need #1

Veterans Treatment Court programs should be expanded across the state.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should expand the funding available to Veterans Treatment Courts including consideration of separate funding mechanisms for the creation of Veterans Treatment Courts and the sustainment of Veterans Treatment Courts as well as funding for treatment and mentoring.
- One such funding proposal that merits consideration is the Justice for Veterans grants submitted in the Legislative Appropriations Request of the Texas Supreme Court. As the Justice for Veterans grants are also funding legal services for Veterans, the Texas Legislature may also want to consider other funding sources such as court fees or traffic tickets. In expanding funding opportunities, however, the Texas Legislature may want to be sensitive to having too many funding entities involved.
- The Texas Legislature should affirm the compliance and reporting requirements it established last session in Senate Bill 462, as codified in Chapter 121, Government Code.
- The Texas Legislature should re-examine the governing statute for Veterans, Chapter 124, Government Code, to determine if the scope should be expanded to include Veterans whose criminal conduct resulted from a service related trauma which “materially affected the defendant’s criminal conduct at issue in the case.”
- Such restrictions limit the eligible Veterans for Veteran Court programs and are broader than the requirements set forth for other specialty court programs.

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- The Texas Legislature acknowledged that funding should be expanded for Veterans Treatment Courts by establishing a Veterans Treatment Court grant program to be administered by the Fund for Veterans Assistance (FVA) at the Texas Veterans Commission (TVC).
- \$3 million will be available for grant awards each biennium (\$1.5 million each fiscal year).
- Legislation authored by Rep. Cesar Blanco and signed by Governor Abbott (H.B. 3996) authorized counties to include Veterans Treatment Courts as a program to which jurors may donate all or a portion of the juror’s daily reimbursement.
- S.B. 1474 by Sen. Garcia, signed by the Governor, expanded the eligibility criteria for Veterans to participate in a Veterans Treatment Court. S.B. 1474 also authorizes Veterans Treatment Courts to transfer responsibility for supervising a defendant’s participation to another program located in the County in which the defendant works or resides.
- H.B. 1048 by Rep. Joe Farias would have made several other improvements to Veterans Treatment Courts but the bill failed to pass this legislative session.
- H.B. 1958 and H.B. 1960 by Rep. Canales made similar changes to S.B. 1474 and H.B. 1048 but failed to pass.

Veteran Need #2

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should have the ability to use the best available data systems to determine the Veteran status of incarcerated Veterans. County jails should also be required to use such a system.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should amend Section 501.023, Government Code, as created by House Bill 634, to remove the specific reference to the system that the TDCJ should use to verify the Veteran status of an inmate:

Sec. 501.023. VERIFICATION OF INMATE VETERAN STATUS. (a) In this section, “system” means the Public Assistance Reporting Information System (PARIS) operated by the Administration for Children and Families of the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

(b) The department shall:

- (1) investigate and verify the Veteran status of each inmate by, in consultation with the Texas Veterans Commission, using the best available federal data made available from the system through the Health and Human Services Commission; and
- (2) use system that data to assist inmates who are Veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation for which the inmates may be eligible under a program administered by the United States Department of Veterans Affairs.

- The Texas Legislature should maintain the requirement for the TDCJ to use that Veteran status to apply for federal benefits or compensation.
- The Texas Legislature should mandate that counties utilize a system like the VA VRSS to determine Veteran status of incarcerated individuals.
- The Texas Legislature should mandate that information about an individual’s military service should be included in an inmate’s admission or booking sheet, as well as intake screening form.

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•The Texas Legislature passed H.B. 875 by Rep. Farias, which was signed by Governor Abbott. H.B. 875 implemented Veteran Need #2 by revising the process used by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to verify the Veteran status of each inmate for purposes of assisting inmates who are Veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation and imposed a similar verification process on the Commission on Jail Standards with respect to inmates who are Veterans.

•County jails should continue to expand their use of the self-reported military service information. (H.B. 875 removes self-reporting and replaces with VRSS)

•County jails should distribute the information packets developed and provided by the VA for Veterans to those who report military service.

•County jails should provide any inmate who reports military service with a Veterans questionnaire to gather additional information to help serve the Veteran. (H.B. 875 implementation will provide post cards to all identified Veterans in county jails so they can contact TVC/MVPN for additional information gathering and services)

•County jails should provide the list of all inmates self-reporting prior military service to the VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJO). (This is done through 875. VRSS sends an automatic email to the VJO when a positive hit is made)

Veteran Need #3

The Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) and County Jails should continue to expand their use of information they have about incarcerated Veterans.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Commissioner Courts, Sheriffs, and the Texas Legislature should consider how to best to implement the previous recommendations of the TCCVS related to county jails and the use of Veteran data for offenders.
- County jails should continue to expand their use of the self-reported military service information.
- County jails should distribute the information packets developed and provided by the VA for Veterans to those who report military service.
- County jails should provide any inmate who reports military service with a Veterans questionnaire to gather additional information to help serve the Veteran.
- County jails should provide the list of all inmates self-reporting prior military service to the VA Veterans Justice Outreach Specialists (VJO).
- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should consider providing specific resources for Veterans incarcerated within TDCJ, including:
 - Four dedicated Texas Veterans Commission counselors (2 for each the two VA Regional Offices in Texas) to support the work of the TDCJ Reentry Case Managers who are completing compensation and pension applications for incarcerated Veterans.
 - Creation of five Veteran-specific positions within TDCJ to assist the approximately 11,000 offenders within TDCJ who are Veterans, specifically a new Veteran's Coordinator position for the Correctional Institutions Division, the Parole Division, the Reentry and Integration Division, and the Community Justice Assistance Division. In addition, a supervisory Veterans Director position would be created in Executive Services.
 - Four statewide MVPN staff to support the volunteers needed for a program which connects incarcerated Veterans with MVPN volunteers during incarceration and after release for community reentry activities.
 - Expansion of groups consisting of incarcerated Veterans, with outside and inside sponsors, similar to the Veterans Incarcerated groups that exist on the Ramsey Unit and the Stiles Unit.
- The TDCJ should collaborate with the Attorney General's Office and require TDCJ to provide every incarcerated Veteran with a child support modification applications during incarceration.
- By doing so, Veterans can take action to reduce large back pay judgments which hamper the ability to return to the community and provide for his children with earned income. The Texas Legislature should consider providing resources to the Attorney General's Office if needed to support this program.

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- The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) is assisting with the implementation of H.B. 875 by developing post cards to be distributed through the Texas Commission on Jail Standards to each county jail. The card will contain information how to contact MVPN and a centralized toll free number as well as information on contacting TVC benefits and claims department and Veterans Crisis Line.

Veteran Need #4

Judges should utilize, and the State of Texas should encourage, programs within Community Supervision and Correction Departments (CSCDs) that address the needs of Veterans on probation.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should provide additional resources to the Community Justice Assistance Division of TDCJ to support programs for Veterans, including:

- Creation of a Veterans Coordinator position within the Community Justice Assistance Division, which would identify resources and provide technical support to community supervision and corrections departments supervising Veteran probationers. This Veterans Coordinator would work under a supervisory Veterans Coordinator within TDCJ Executive Services and work with other Veterans Coordinator positions in Correctional Institutions Division, the Parole Division, and the Reentry and Integration Division.

- Mandate that certain pods at various Substance Abuse Felony Punishment Facilities (SAFPF) be designated for Veterans.

- Provide the four statewide MVPN staff members recommended as part of Veteran Need 3 who could also work to provide peer to peer support for Veterans returning to the community from a SAFP as well as for those Veterans on specialized Veterans' caseloads.

- Encourage CSCDs to use Veteran peer to peer support and require the Community Justice

- Assistance Division to provide technical assistance on implementing Veteran peer to peer support.

- Designate a community corrections facility to solely house and treat Veterans for mental health issues and substance abuse problems.

- This facility would serve the entire State and be used for those Veterans who have serious substance abuse and/or mental health problems that have contributed to their criminal activities and who are ineligible for VA benefits. In addition this facility would serve Veterans being supervised on community supervision and who are utilizing VA outpatient services but still need to be placed in a residential setting. Such a facility should be capable of housing between 40 and 50 probationers who are Veterans.

- Add funding in the discretionary funding (DP) line item to create specialized caseloads for Veterans on community supervision.

- This case load should supervise no more than 50 to 60 Veterans and it would be best for the supervision officer overseeing this case load to also be a Veteran. Three types of criminal conduct for which a specialized caseload would be beneficial are:

- Assaultive/terroristic threat offenses

- Drug possession offenses

- Driving while intoxicated

- This new funding should target jurisdictions with large Veteran populations. These jurisdictions would primarily be metropolitan areas, suburban areas or jurisdictions with active duty military bases. There are approximately 20 to 25 CSCDs that serve these targeted jurisdictions.

84th Legislative Session Update

- H.B. 3726 by Rep. Joe Farias failed to pass this legislative session. However, the bill would have established a Veterans Service coordinator for the TDCJ to coordinate responses to the needs of Veterans under the supervision of the department, including Veterans who are released on parole or mandatory supervision.

Veteran Need #5

The State of Texas and local governments should provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers. In particular, first responders should increase their early intervention efforts for Veterans who exhibit brain and PTSD symptoms.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should find ways to provide training relating to Veterans to judges, prosecutors, law enforcement officers, jailers, and correctional officers, specifically:

- Encourage and fund training for first responders, including 911 dispatchers, that specifically includes methods for recognizing and responding appropriately to Veterans and family members who exhibit symptoms of post-traumatic stress, including military sexual trauma, or traumatic brain injuries.
- Provide incentives for municipalities and counties to develop early intervention strategies, including, where appropriate, sobering stations, psychiatric emergency centers, and data sharing among first responders and mental health outreach professionals.
- Provide incentives for municipal, county, state, and federal agencies to cooperate in identifying and following up with Veterans and family members who become involved in the criminal justice system or the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to make them aware of options for treatment and alternatives to avoid incarceration or sanctions.
- Create incentives for connecting Veterans and family members to Veteran County Service Officers and trained Veteran peers such as those who participate in the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN), a project of the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) that is coordinated statewide by the Texas Veterans Commission and supported by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), and the Texas Council of Community Centers.
- Support to the Office of Acquired Brain Injury (training support), the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (staff and/or training support), the Texas Commission on Jail Standards (staff and/or training support), the Texas Department of Public Safety (training support), the Office of the Attorney General (training support), and the Criminal Justice Division within the Office of the Governor (additional grant funds).

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- H.B. 1338 by Rep. Elliott Naishtat, signed by Governor Abbott, requires the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement, in collaboration with the Texas Veterans Commission, to establish and maintain a training program for peace officers that provides information on Veterans with certain specified trauma-related injuries.

Veteran Need #6

Incarcerated Veterans should be housed with other Veterans facing similar sentences in county jails and Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ), Veteran Dorms, and those incarcerated Veterans should be working with volunteers provided by the Military Veteran Peer Network (MVPN) or the Veteran County Service Office both during incarceration and after release.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should provide support for the TDCJ to not only continue, but to expand Veteran Dorms within State Jails but other TDCJ correctional institutions for verified Veteran offenders.
- The Texas Legislature should provide support to the four statewide MVPN staff members recommended as part of Veteran Needs 3 and 4 so staff can provide support to the individuals assigned to the Veteran Dorms.
- The Texas Legislature should provide support to the Veteran County Service Officers to access incarcerated Veterans through the volunteer services program and upon reentry.
- The Texas Legislature should require the TDCJ to engage with the MVPN and the Veteran County Service Officers to share information regarding incarcerated Veterans and assist in access to the Veteran for assistance both during and after incarceration.

84th Legislative Session Update:

- H.B. 3726 by Rep. Joe Farias failed to pass this legislative session. However, the bill would have established a voluntary rehabilitation and transition program “Veterans Dorm” for Veterans confined in state jail facilities.

Veteran Need #7

The State of Texas and the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs should expand secure mental health care facilities for eligible Veterans who have been arrested, but are incompetent to participate in their own defense.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- As previously recommended, the Texas Legislature should urge the U.S. Congress to require the VA to provide resources to Veterans in state hospitals and consider expanding such services to all incarcerated Veterans.

84th Legislative Session Update:

- HCR 46 by Rep. Joe Farias, signed by the Governor, urges Congress to request the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide VA services to incarcerated Veterans detained in state hospitals and to consider expanding such services to all incarcerated Veterans.

Veteran Need #8

Offenders who are Veterans within the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ) should be able to utilize Correctional Managed Healthcare to in order to complete the Disability Benefit Questionnaires required to apply for certain service-connected disability benefits with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs

Conclusions and Recommendations

- The Texas Legislature should provide funding to the TDCJ and Correctional Managed Health Care to support the medical examinations that are part of the Disability Benefits Questionnaires required for Veteran offenders filing a Fully Developed Claim with the VA.

84th Legislative Session Update

No applicable legislation

HOUSING WORKGROUP

Veteran Need #1

Veterans need greater access to safe and affordable housing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC), coordinating with the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs (TDHCA), should take steps to increase the amount of funds available to expand and strengthen the existing network of non-profit organizations around the state that have the capacity to utilize funds to serve the housing needs of Veterans. These steps include:

- Increase the commitment to Housing4TexasHeroes (H4TXH) program through additional funding to the Housing Trust Fund. Funding levels should be restored to the amount appropriated by the 81st Legislature.
- Grant priority access to non-profit organizations that provide direct housing assistance to Veterans to the other Housing Trust Fund programs administered by TDHCA, including but not limited to those used for accessibility modifications.
- Increase awareness among non-profit organizations and communities by expanding outreach efforts that promote the H4TXH program and other Housing Trust Fund programs on state agency websites, grantee websites, and Veteran information websites.

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- The 84th Legislature funded the Housing Trust Fund at levels similar to the 82nd Legislature.
- Senate Bill 1580, by Sen. Garcia directs the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs and the Texas Interagency Council for Homeless to conduct a study and prepare a report on homeless Veterans to provide for a more accurate depiction of the challenges that Veterans experiencing homelessness face and provide for a more viable solutions for homeless Veterans.

Veteran Need #2

Surviving spouses of totally disabled Veterans need property tax relief equitable to that which would be provided to the totally disabled Veteran.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Legislative action could be considered, which would only apply to future tax years, in order to provide eligibility to spouses whose 100% disabled Veteran spouse would have qualified for the exemption, but passed away prior to the enactment of the exemption.

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H.B. 992 (enabling legislation) and H.J.R. 75, by Rep. Bonnen, were both passed by the legislature and signed by the governor. H.J.R. proposes a constitutional amendment authorizing the legislature to provide for an exemption from ad valorem taxation of all or part of the market value of the residence homestead of the surviving spouse of a 100 percent or totally disabled Veteran who died before the law authorizing a residence homestead exemption for such a Veteran took effect.

H.J.R. 75 will be placed on the ballot as Proposition 2 on the November 3, 2015 election date.

WOMAN VETERANS WORKGROUP

Veteran Need #1

Women Veterans should increase their awareness of gender specific services and benefits they may qualify for within the Veterans Health Administration (VHA).

Conclusions and Recommendations

The state should compile a report using similar metrics of analysis within the American Legion Task Force Report. Additionally, a statewide survey of Women Veterans' healthcare priorities should be included in this report to better understand factors relating to gender specific health and benefits.

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- S.B. 1304 by Sen. Menendez adds a women's Veteran initiative to the requirements for the DSHS mental health intervention program for Veterans.

Veteran Need #2

Tax incentives should be offered for housing programs that serve Women Veterans and their dependents.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The state should create property tax incentives including exemptions and/or a freeze in the tax rate paid when the property was purchased to incentivize more organizations to participate in affordable housing programs focused on serving Women Veterans and their dependents.

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- H.B. 2914, by Rep. Alvarado, aimed to exempt eligible organizations from ad valorem taxation of property owned by certain charitable organizations that provide affordable housing to low-income Veterans and their dependents. H.B. 2914 was referred to Ways & Means on March 16, 2015 and left pending in committee.

Veteran Need #3

Women Veterans need better access to affordable childcare.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Child care can be extremely expensive, especially for lower income families and Veterans transitioning to civilian life. Without quality child care arrangements, working parents are hard-pressed to remain effective either at work or at home. Texas is home to 1.67 million Veterans, many working for the federal and state government. According to the 2012 Veteran Workforce Summary Report, there are almost 32,000 Veterans employed by the State of Texas.

- The state should offer a version of Childcare Subsidy Program that would assist Women Veteran employees with subsidized child care. Allowing state employees to take advantage of subsidized childcare would attract top tier employees, and provide the flexibility many, including Women Veterans, consider when making employment decisions.

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H.B. 1521, by Rep. Farrar, would give state agencies the authority to establish child-care subsidy programs to assist their low-income employees with child-care costs. Multiple agencies in a multitenant building may establish a joint program and share costs.

State employees who qualify as a low-income employees under a state agency's child-care subsidy program are eligible to receive a child-care subsidy for the care of each child under age 13, or a child with a disability under age 18.

The bill would not require a state agency to develop a child-care subsidy program. The bill would allow each state agency to determine qualifications for program participation and level of subsidy.

H.B. 1521 was heard in the House Committee on State Affairs on March 25, 2015. TVC was a resource witness for the bill. H.B. 1521 was left pending in committee.

TRANSPORTATION WORKGROUP

Veteran Need #1

Veterans, specifically disabled Veterans, need reliable transportation options for accessing VA medical services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Utilize a pilot project in one area of the state, and more specifically in the service area of a single VA Medical Center, to establish a formal relationship for communication and coordination between VA medical facilities and regional transit providers to increase access to transportation options and to promote public/ Veteran awareness of existing transportation resources available within their community.
- As a component of that effort, encourage public transit providers involved to provide a minimum “benefits package” to Veterans that could be used to create a standard “benefits package” with transit providers throughout the state.

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TVC received grant funding to aid rural counties in providing more transportation options for Veterans.

The free transportation is made possible through VA’s Highly Rural Transportation Grants program.

The program enables State Veterans Service Agencies and Veteran Service Organizations to use innovative approaches to provide transportation services that help to expand access to VA health care for Veterans.

VA awarded eleven grants to organizations including TVC that will receive up to \$50,000 per highly-rural area to help operate or contract for free transportation services for Veterans to-and-from VA medical facilities and when authorized to non-VA facilities.

TVC-FVA has executed 7 grant agreements to date. The grants will assist an estimated 2,000 Veterans in Kent, Briscoe, Cochran, Hansford, Jim Hogg, McMullen, and Menard counties.

Veteran Need #2

Local governments, communities, and service organizations that provide transportation services to Veterans need access to funding and resources to ensure the sustainability of their programs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Increase awareness of funding options, specifically with local government and community organizations that provide critical transportation services to Veterans in order to make these services more sustainable.

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- No applicable legislation

Veteran Need #3

Veterans and communities both benefit from standardized forms of recognition and designation as “Veterans”, specifically when utilizing transportation options.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Continue to support modes and methods of recognition for Veterans through things like specialty license plates and “Veteran” designation on Driver’s License and Concealed Handgun Licenses.

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- Numerous pieces of legislation were passed which will allow DMV to issue specialty license plates honoring Veterans who fit into specific types of service categories.
- The Legislature expanded opportunities for the public to donate to the Fund for Veterans’ Assistance (FVA) to help Texas Veterans in need. House Bill 3710, by Rep. Cesar Blanco allows Texans to make donations to the FVA when applying for a concealed handgun license; and House Bill 1584, by Rep. Farias, extends the same option for Texans applying for a hunting or fishing license.

Similar pieces of legislation have been passed in previous Legislative Sessions, and they have generated over \$600,000 in donations to the FVA. It is anticipated that these two new revenue sources will yield similar results.

COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH

Veteran Need #1

State agencies should create a system to function as the point of contact for Veterans' services within each state agency.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The Texas Veterans Commission should promulgate a rule in the Texas Administrative Code that requires state agencies to develop a system to function as the point of contact for Veterans services within each state agency.

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The budget conference committee approved Rider 17.06 in Article IX-76 of the 2016-2017 G.A.A.:

Sec. 17.06. Veterans Services at Other State Agencies. Out of funds appropriated elsewhere in this Act, any state agency or institution of higher education, including the Veterans Commission, Department of State Health Service, Texas Military Department, Texas Workforce Commission, General Land Office, or any other state agency or institution that receives funding in this Act and provides specific services to Veterans, shall provide information to Veterans seeking assistance from that state agency or institution of other state agencies or institutions that provide additional Veterans specific services, as identified by the Texas Coordinating Council for Veterans Services.

*Required action by TCCVS

Veteran Need #2

All state services and resources for Veterans need to be coordinated so that Veterans and their families can easily find and access state information, benefits and programs regardless of point-of-entry.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- All state-funded call center and information referral network employees should receive a minimum amount of customer service training specifically for Veterans and their family members as well as have certain tools at hand (call-center software, agency flow charts) to ensure that each Veteran or family member receives current information in a timely manner.
- State-funded call center resources (including 2-1-1) and technology should be studied so that operating procedures and best practices can be analyzed and standardized for Veterans and their families.

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To better inform Veterans about the services offered in Texas, the Texas Legislature passed S.B. 1308, by Sen. Menendez which was signed by Gov. Abbott. S.B. 1308 requires the Texas Department of Public Safety to provide Veterans who receive driver's licenses and personal identification certificates one-page informational papers about Veterans services provided by Texas.

•The Texas Legislature passed H.B. 875 by Rep. Farias, which was signed by Governor Abbott. H.B. 875 implemented Veteran Need #2 by revising the process used by the Texas Department of Criminal Justice to verify the Veteran status of each inmate for purposes of assisting inmates

who are Veterans in applying for federal benefits or compensation and imposed a similar verification process on the Commission on Jail Standards with respect to inmates who are Veterans.

Veteran Need #3

State outreach collaboration efforts need to improve to better target Veterans and their families for needed information and services.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Current training and collaboration among state networks and first responders should be studied so that standardized best practices can be implemented in a form that can be easily shared.
- Training in military culture, Veteran family identification strategies, and information referral should be developed for use by state networks and first responders to create a common training standard across serving agencies; in particular for first responders, judges, educators, and mental health/substance abuse providers (e.g. Veteran Tactical Response).

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In March 2014, HHSC launched a free mobile application for Texas Veterans, active duty personnel, military families, and service providers.

The Veteran Phone APP offers access to the following: Veterans Crisis Line, Hotline for Women Veterans, Connect with Texas Veterans, Texas Veterans Hotline (managed by the VLB), and the Texas Veterans Portal (managed by TVC).

Texas Veterans Portal (TVP)

The Texas Veterans Commission (TVC) manages this website, which includes helpful information from many government agencies that provide assistance, services, and benefits for Texas Veterans, their families, and survivors.

HHSC coordinates with TVC to ensure that all state agency websites include the portal. HHSC is also working with county governments to include the portal in their websites and to expand at the local level, extending TVP to city government and private industry.